

Amnesty International opposes US abuse of Private Manning

Patrick Martin
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Amnesty International charged the US government with “inhumane treatment” of Private Bradley Manning, the US soldier accused of leaking secret military and diplomatic files to the whistleblower web site WikiLeaks.

Manning has been detained since last May and held in solitary confinement for the past seven months, under conditions clearly intended to be punitive, although the 23-year-old soldier has not even been formally charged, let alone convicted of any offense.

The army private is confined to a cell for 23 hours a day and denied a pillow, sheets or personal possessions like his prescription glasses and most clothing. Manning has declared that, in view of his poor eyesight, depriving him of glasses has left him in “essential blindness.”

Susan Lee, Amnesty International’s program director for the Americas, said in a statement, “We are concerned that the conditions inflicted on Bradley Manning are unnecessarily severe and amount to inhumane treatment by the US authorities.”

“Manning has not been convicted of any offence, but military authorities appear to be using all available means to punish him while in detention,” Amnesty said. “This undermines the United States commitment to the principle of the presumption of innocence.”

Amnesty sent a letter last week to US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, urging a review of the conditions under which Manning is being held.

Manning has been classified by the military as a “maximum custody” detainee, although he has no history of violence or disciplinary violations while imprisoned. His hands and legs are shackled during visits and he is denied any opportunity to work, leaving his cell only for one hour of exercise per day, conducted in a closed room.

He has been placed on “prevention of injury” designation, allegedly to prevent self-harm. This designation subjects Manning to virtually continuous surveillance and disruption of sleep.

“The repressive conditions imposed on Manning breach the US’s obligations to treat detainees with humanity and dignity,” Susan Lee of Amnesty said. “We are also concerned that isolation and prolonged cellular confinement, which evidence shows can cause psychological impairment, may undermine Bradley Manning’s ability to defend himself.”

Manning was arrested after WikiLeaks made public leaked footage of atrocities committed by US helicopter gunners in Iraq, in the course of which two Reuters journalists and many other civilians were machine-gunned from the air, while the pilots and other crew members gloated.

The video footage, together with tens of thousands of reports on military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan posted on WikiLeaks, provided unambiguous evidence of American war crimes in both countries. This was followed by the diplomatic cables, with the first 2,500 out of a total of 250,000 posted on WikiLeaks, demonstrating the criminality and duplicity of American foreign policy.

In the view of American imperialism, someone has to pay for these devastating exposures—not the war criminals, but those who exposed them. The Obama administration singled out Private Manning as its designated scapegoat.

He was charged with “transferring classified data” and “delivering national defense information to an unauthorized source,” and faces up to 52 years in prison if convicted.

The day before the Amnesty International announcement, two visitors to Manning were stopped

and detained by military guards at the Quantico Marine Base in the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, where he has been imprisoned since May.

David House, a friend of Manning who has been his primary visitor at Quantico and the main source of information about his deteriorating condition, was accompanied by Jane Hamsher, a blogger on the liberal web site Firedoglake.com, who was delivering a petition signed by 42,000 people calling for an end to the mistreatment of Manning.

They were stopped 10 feet inside the main gate by MPs, one of whom told them that orders to detain them had “come from the top.” They used the pretext of Hamsher’s auto insurance card, which was a digital copy rather than the original, to order the car impounded and towed away.

The two were held for two hours, until after visiting time had expired, and then released. According to a posting on firedoglake.com, this is the first time House has been denied access to Manning.

Manning’s attorney, David Coombs, filed an Article 138 complaint January 19, charging that Manning was being held under inhumane conditions which had been made harsher rather than milder after the abuse became public. Coombs said the military revoked Manning’s hour of exercise until after he filed the complaint.

Coombs wrote on his blog that the Marine Corps jailer, Navy Chief Warrant Officer James Averhart, placed Manning on 24-hour suicide watch from Tuesday evening to Thursday afternoon (January 18-20), although this was not recommended by the base psychiatrist, who regularly examines Manning.

The attorney said that no reason had been given for the change from “prevention of injury” to suicide watch, adding, “The fact that they won’t articulate any basis for it leaves you with no other conclusion than it must be punitive.”



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